'Family values' in the Gospel tradition

Frey, Jörg

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573619859021

Article

THEOLOGY TODAY

"Family Values" in the Gospel Tradition

Theology Today
2019, Vol. 76(3) 209–216

DOI: 10.1177/0040573619859021
journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj
SAGE

Jörg Frey
Universität Zürich, Theologische Fakultät, Zurich, Switzerland

Abstract

This article discusses the idea of "family values," developed in modern Western Protestantism, within the horizon of family-related sayings in the Gospel tradition. In accord with general tendencies of the Hellenistic period, early Christianity opened up the possibility of a religious affiliation different from that suggested by ethnic, tribal, or familial tradition. A first challenge to traditional family obligations can be seen in the lifestyle of Jesus and his earliest disciples: In Mark, Jesus is depicted in a strong distance from his physical family. Common family obligations are questioned, and those who follow him and God's word are called his real family. In Matthew and Luke, the distance is softened due to the idea that Jesus' family is already aware of his mission and destiny. In John, his earthly mother is present under his cross, and also Joseph as his father is openly mentioned, but his true origins are in the realm of God, and for his Galilean contemporaries, knowledge of his earthly origins is rather an argument not to believe him. In John, finally, family aspects are transferred to the community which is the new family of God, shaped by the mutual love and support of the disciples. In a global context of theology, the various biblical views on family matters and also the different patterns of community structures have to be negotiated, and the challenge of the radical questioning of traditional values in Jesus' ministry should not be ignored.

Keywords

family, family values, Jesus, Gospels, family of God

Corresponding author:
Jörg Frey, Universität Zürich, Theologische Fakultät, Kirchgasse 9, 8001 Zurich, Switzerland.
Email: joerg.frey@theol.uzh.ch

"Family values" have become an important part of Western—not only North American—Christianity. In this context, the term usually refers to what is called a "traditional family," a nuclear family, consisting of a father who earns the money, a mother who keeps the house, and their own, biological children. But this is not the only thing that is meant by the term. The term "family values" also encompasses certain moral principles that are to be upheld and passed on within the family unit. These principles include work and social values such as honesty, reliability, and respect for others and are not limited to these spheres alone but are deeply connected with social and political conservativism. In the most recent decades, the term has been increasingly used by conservative Christians to politically fight nontraditional family patterns or gender roles. In Roman Catholic tradition, the Holy Family (Joseph, Mary, and child Jesus) is often presented as a pattern of such families, and Evangelicals often consider this the biblically ordained way of personal and moral life. Thus, the "traditional family" is often considered to be "the" only, best, or even "Christian" view of family, notwithstanding the fact that many other cultures in the world still practice different family patterns (e.g., much larger, multi-generation families), and also the fact that in the Western world, a growing number, indeed the majority, of households are not made up of "traditional" families.

Against this background, we explore the "Christian" contribution to the question of family and "family values,"[1] in particular the contribution the Gospel tradition makes to this question. The New Testament includes quite contradictory views on this matter, with obvious differences between the household codes in, for example, Ephesians or the Pastorals and some sayings of Jesus from the Synoptic tradition (cf. Matt 10:37–8 par. Luke 14:26–7). The early history of the Jesus movement provides us with perspectives that question the predominant view in Western conservative Christian circles. "Traditional" family values are not the one and only pattern presented or even propagated in the Bible.[2]

The Jewish and Hellenistic Contexts

When raising the issue of family relations in the ancient world, we encounter a different culture. The understanding of "family" is quite different from the modern Western views sketched above. In the Hebrew Bible, there is no term for "family" in the modern sense; there are, instead, various degrees of kinship from the "house of the father" (Hebr. *bet av*) to the clan (Hebr. *mišpaḥah*) up to the tribe and the whole of Israel. In the Roman world, "family" could refer to blood relations and marriage-based relations as well as to more extended kin relations including

1. See the important study by C. Osiek, "The Family in Early Christianity: 'Family Values' Revisited," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (1996): 1–24.

2. A helpful discussion of the different views on family, marriage, and sex in the Bible is J. W. Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2011).

persons unrelated by ties of blood or marriage.[3] A Roman "house" included children, unmarried relatives, slaves, and often also "freedmen and freedwomen or other renters of shop or residential property."[4] Within this household, the *pater familias* had authority over the lives of his wife, children, slaves, and other household members. This is the pattern partly adopted in the "patriarchalistic" household codes in the later New Testament writings.

According to a useful typology, families in the area of first-century Galilee could be large families, multiple families (i.e., several conjugal families living together in mutual support in a courtyard house), nuclear families (partly living together with relatives), or (economically precarious) scattered families.[5] This implies that the ministry of Jesus and his sayings already address a complex society with quite different social and economic patterns of life. In a conspicuous number of sayings preserved in the Gospel tradition, Jesus seems to question the traditionally inherited forms of family: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (Matt 12:48), and "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:37). Here, "family" and "religion" are brought in tension, and an important aspect to be discussed, apart from family structures and obligations, is the relevance of the family for religious affiliation.

In this respect, the Jesus movement, or emerging "Christianity," seems to have led to or rather participated in a remarkable change: In the ancient world, religious affiliation, that is the participation in a cult and the related traditions, was usually linked with belonging to a certain tribe, kingdom, city, or family. Thus, any individual was expected to follow the ancestral religion or rites, the cult installed for the god of the respective kingdom or empire, or for the goddess of the city. Rural religious rites or family or household religion were also practiced according to ancestral customs and handed down from generation to generation.[6] This is also true for the Israelite or Judaean traditions: Religious obligations for men and women, according to their respective status, were usually determined by birth and upraising in the family, village, or tribe. There is, however, the possibility of conversion, starting at some point in the postexilic period and practiced particularly in the diaspora, but this is a new development, and conversion ultimately implies the complete integration into the ethnic body of Israel and, in the case of marriage, into the new family.

3. J. B. Green, "Family, Friends, and Foes," in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3, ed. T. Holmén and S. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 2431–53, here 2431; see also H. Moxnes, "What is Family? Problems in Constructing Early Christian Families," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. H. Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 13–41.

4. Osiek, "The Family in Early Christianity," 11.

5. S. Gujjarro, "The Family in First-Century Galilee," in *Constructing Early Christian Families*, ed. Moxnes, 42–65 (57–61).

6. On the relationship between descent or citizenship and cultic rights or obligations in Greek and Roman religion, see the comprehensive study by S. Krauter, *Bürgerrecht und Kultteilnahme: Politische und kultische Rechte und Pflichten in griechischen Poleis, Rom und antikem Judentum*, BZNW 127 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2004).

These new developments in Judaism coincide with the rise of Hellenism, the development of a new awareness of an *oikoumene*, an idea of the whole inhabited world (according to the knowledge of the time), crossing the borders of the single ethnos or kingdom.[7] The rise of a universal culture covering the whole Mediterranean and beyond and of a universal language, *koine* (= common) Greek, also had implications with regard to the possibilities of religious affiliation. The ethnically and socially determined patterns of religion were not completely replaced but at least supplemented by forms of religious affiliation which could offer individual participation: mystery cults, voluntary associations, and philosophies with religious aspects opened up the chance for individuals (not only the wealthy, not only men) to join a cult, an association, or a philosophy regardless of their ethnic, civic, or familial background.[8] Of course, there were individual restrictions and rules for each cult or association about who could participate and under which conditions. But the general possibility of changing religious practice according to an individual decision is generally opened up within the Hellenistic period. This is the wider intellectual and cultural framework in which conversion to Judaism could take place. It is also the framework in which a "conversion religion" such as the early Jesus movement could grow and spread.

Jesus and His Family according to Mark

In our earliest Gospel, Mark, Jesus is only introduced as coming from Nazareth in Galilee (Mark 1:9), but there is no further information about his family or origins. Interestingly, family matters are only mentioned with regard to Peter: In Mark 1:30, the author mentions that Peter's mother-in-law lives in Peter's house. Thus, Peter's family was possibly a larger family, at the least not simply a nuclear family. Given that as fishermen Peter and his brother Andrew had to provide for a larger family, it might be considered a striking neglect of traditional familial obligations when these two left their home and source of income to follow a wandering healer and preacher, living on the daily alms of others, while leaving the care for their family or families to others. Seen in this light, Peter seems to violate ancient as well as modern "family values."

Jesus' family is first mentioned in Mark 3:21, albeit in an indirect manner (*hoi par autou* = his relatives)[9] and quite negatively. They obviously did not support his lifestyle or activity, and it is narrated that they want to seize him or take custody

7. The important implications of the rise of Hellenism and its significance for the later spread of the gospel have been sketched by M. Hengel (with H. Lichtenberger), "Die Hellenisierung des antiken Judentums als Praeparatio Evangelica," in idem, *Judaica et Hellenistica: Kleine Schriften 1*, WUNT 90 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 295–313.

8. See also S. C. Barton, "The Relativisation of Family Ties in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman Traditions," in *Constructing Early Christian Families*, ed. Moxnes, 81–100, with reference to Philo and Josephus, but also to the Cynics and Stoics.

9. This is interestingly veiled by some translations. Thus, the King James Version translates, "his friends."

of him, considering him to be crazy or a madman. Thus, in the earliest Gospel, Jesus' relatives are introduced as being in forceful opposition to him and his ministry. What the earthly Jesus did was contrary to what could be expected from the eldest son of a family, especially when the father was absent or had possibly already died. This is subsequently confirmed by Jesus himself when, after the Beelzebub discussion, his family is again mentioned as attempting to call or summon him (Mark 3:31), possibly to urge him to abandon his ministry and to come back home to fulfil his duties there. Jesus, however, openly rejects the call of his physical family. Talking not directly to them but only to the crowd surrounding him, he goes so far as to deny his relationship with his physical relatives: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And, looking at those sitting around, he answers, "Behold, my mother and my brothers! For whoever does God's will, is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:33–35). Not the physical relatives but those who do the will of God, that is the new, eschatological community of his disciples are his real community and family. This is a very strong rejection of conventional family values, not only with regard to Jesus' home culture but also to present cultural contexts.

The harshness of Jesus' rejection is softened in Matthew and Luke, where, according to the infancy stories narrated previously, Jesus' mother is already informed about his true origin and destiny.[10] The small scene in Mark 3:20–21, where Jesus' relatives declare him a madman, is omitted in Luke and Matthew. The saying "Who is my mother and my brothers?" (Mark 3:33) is omitted in Luke and softened by a new introduction in Matthew (Matt 12:46). In both cases, the embarrassment of the outright rejection of family members is reduced, and the talk about those who do God's will being his relatives can now be understood as a supplement rather than an outright rejection of his own family.

Historically, Mark's view of Jesus' family relationships must be taken seriously, because it is in marked difference from the general tendency of the Gospel tradition: "It is probably not the sort of depiction that the church would have created out of thin air, since it seems to put both Jesus and his family in a dubious light."[11] It was probably corroborated by the experience of some later Jesus followers who felt themselves also alienated from their own families or had abandoned them "for the gospel's sake," as is applauded by Jesus in Mark 10:28–31. Jesus' call to follow him and the radical life of wandering discipleship quite probably caused tensions in the families of the disciples. The replacement of family relationships and the experience of being alienated from one's physical relatives or even "hated" by other family members (cf. Mark 13:12–13) but being attached to a new "family" of God

10. In the later Jewish-Christian Gospel tradition, James, the brother of the Lord, is made a believer before Easter (cf. the Gospel according to the Hebrews).

11. J. Marcus, *Mark*, the Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 279. Scholars have tried to explain this image as a redactional polemic against relatives of Jesus who were later influential in the Jerusalem church, representing a Torah-oriented form of Jewish Christianity, but the evidence for such a polemical intention is unconvincing.

might have further shaped, but not initially created, the image of Jesus' own family ties.[12]

Jesus and His Family in the Later Gospel Tradition

In Luke and Matthew, the image is gradually changed. Jesus' family is most prominent in the stories about his birth and in the genealogies. In the genealogies, Jesus is placed into a sequence starting with Adam (in Luke) or Abraham (in Matthew) and is presented as a Davidic descendant. However, Joseph, who was unmentioned in Mark, is presented as his "supposed" father (Luke 3:23) or his stepfather (Matt 1:16). Luke "makes a prophet and exemplary disciple out of Mary,"[13] and since his mother is already informed about his destiny (Luke 2:19, 51), she cannot be depicted as unbelieving or opposed to his ministry. The canonical and apocryphal Gospel tradition gradually filled the gaps left in the earliest tradition, supplementing stories about Jesus' birth and his youth (e.g., the story about the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple in Luke 2:41–52), other stories about Jesus as a child that are given in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, or about the youth of his mother Mary in the *Protevangelium of James*.

In the Gospel of John, however, the infancy and birth traditions which were possibly known to the evangelist (cf. John 7:42), can be omitted.[14] Without any hesitation, John calls Jesus "the son of Joseph from Nazareth" (John 1:45; 6:42). John can do without infancy stories and legends about a miraculous birth because Jesus' true origin is, according to his view, not in the miracle of a spiritual begetting but in the preexistence of the Logos with God (John 1:1–2), that is before human time and history, so that his divine origin and identity are not ensured by a supernatural begetting. Only for his unbelieving contemporaries, Jesus' human origins are a reason not to believe in him (John 6:42), but their reasoning is on the level of misunderstanding. The believer (e.g., Nathanael), on the other hand, can truly confess Jesus as "Son of God" (John 1:49) while he is at the same time "the son of Joseph from Nazareth" (John 1:45).

In John, Jesus' earthly family plays a surprising role. His brothers are depicted at a certain distance from him. John 7:5 clearly states they did not believe, nor have they any understanding of Jesus' particular mission (cf. John 7:6–8). But his mother is depicted differently. She appears together with his brothers in the scene of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1, 3), where she is harshly rejected by her son (2:4), but also points to the words of Jesus (2:5) so that in a way she functions as a witness for her son.[15] Finally, she returns just in his "hour" (cf. 2:4), the hour

12. Cf. Marcus, *Mark*, 280.

13. C. Osiek, "Family: III. New Testament," *Religion Past and Present* 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 45.

14. See J. Frey, "How Could Mark and John Do without Infancy Stories?" in *Infancy Gospels: Story and Identity*, ed. C. Clivaz et al., WUNT 281 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 189–215.

15. On the subtleties of this text see J. Frey, "Das prototypische Zeichen (Joh 2,1–11)," in *The Opening of John's Narrative (John 1:19–2:22): Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings from the*

of his death, standing under the cross where she is entrusted to the disciple whom Jesus loves (John 19:25–27). This enigmatic scene has given rise to a number of questions: Does the evangelist simply want to state that Jesus fulfilled his family duties by caring for his mother and entrusting her to his best friend before his untimely death? However, the scene is filled with a deep theological symbolism, and in the words of Jesus, a mutual exchange of "places" is developed: Jesus takes the place of sinful humans on the cross, whereas the one whom he loves takes his place as son. In my view, this points ahead to the designation of the disciples as children, not of Jesus' mother, but of God. John 20:17 presents this in a remarkable manner[16] when Jesus, the resurrected one, rejects being touched or even kept by Mary Magdalene, but announces that he will ascend to "my father and your father, to my God and your God." In this saying, it is clear that now after Jesus' death and resurrection (and thus throughout John's Gospel and Epistles) the disciples are considered children of God, that is, brothers and sisters, a new family. Although the sonship of Jesus is unique, and there is no common sonship of Jesus and his disciples, they are now considered a new family of God, begotten by God himself (John 1:13) or by the Spirit, and also called to live in according to a kind of family ethics of mutual solidarity.[17]

As in Mark, Jesus' physical family is ultimately depicted as distant, in spite of the prominent position of his mother. Mark's fundamental questioning of the traditional familial obligations is, therefore, confirmed in John. However, the familial imagery and its implications are transferred to the community of Jesus followers. Belonging to Jesus entails detachment from physical familial or ethnic ties and being joined to the new community constituted—regardless of ethnicity or other aspects of descent—"in spirit and truth" (John 4:23), by faith in Jesus and by his salvific way into death. Family values are now transferred to the church, and thus they are a remaining ethical challenge.

Conclusions

Of course, there is a tension within the New Testament: Whereas the Jesus tradition shows a remarkable distance from traditional family values and provocatively stresses the eschatological radicality of "alternative" forms of individual and communal life (discipleship), and the community of disciples is depicted in terms of a family of brothers and sisters with the ideal of mutual support and a flat hierarchy, other canonical traditions embrace the more hierarchical and patriarchal pattern of the Roman "house," thus modeling the church in terms of a hierarchical society.

Colloquium Ioanneum in Ephesus, ed. R. A. Culpepper and J. Frey, WUNT 385 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 165–216.

16. Cf. F. Back, *Gott als Vater der Glaubenden*, WUNT II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

17. Cf. J. Frey, "'Ethical' Traditions, Family Ethos, and Love in the Johannine Literature," in idem, *Die Herrlichkeit des Gekreuzigten: Studien zu den johanneischen Schriften 1*, ed. J. Schlegel, WUNT 307 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 767–802.

Those developments, particularly in the later writings of the New Testament, can be explained from a certain adaption to the contemporary society, whereas the Jesus tradition has kept the provoking memory of different and partly radical lifestyles of the disciples in the time of Jesus and thereafter.

Such diversity within the New Testament canon is in my view a gain, not a loss. It reminds us of the fact that there has always been a wider variety of lifestyles and family constructions, from the biblical world through the history of the church until the present time. Such diversity is even strengthened when we consider the development of the church within different cultural contexts in present global Christianity. The contribution of biblical theology can be to prevent an undue harmonization or ideologization of certain options (e.g., the modern Western or North American "family values"), to stimulate the awareness for such diversity, and to reintroduce the critical potential of neglected biblical traditions, such as the radical rejection of "sacred" obligations (e.g., of burying one's father; cf. Matt 8:21–22) or the mutually supportive but nonhierarchical "family" of brothers and sisters guided by the commandment of mutual love as presented in the Fourth Gospel (John 13:34–35). It is the task of responsible theology to negotiate between those various images and impulses and to relate them to the situation and life of the church in various cultural contexts.

Author biography

Jörg Frey is Professor of New Testament Studies at the Theological Faculty of the University of Zurich and Research Associate at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. His main fields of research are the Johannine literature, ancient Judaism and the Dead Sea Scrolls, and New Testament theology and hermeneutics.